

# **NSW Inquiry into Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and Young People in NSW**

Submission from the *Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network*

April 2025

### ***About the Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network***

This submission has been prepared by a network of 20 not-for-profit child and family organisations that provide early childhood intervention services and/or early childhood education with an average of 55 years of experience. Together, we support over 6,000 children in early childhood intervention under the NDIS and over 22,000 children and young people and their families annually in metropolitan and regional areas. While we primarily operate across NSW, we also have representation in Victoria, the ACT and Queensland.

Our network members have long standing experience in the early childhood intervention sector through the former Early Childhood Intervention Association NSW/ACT Chapter. In 2021, we united again to advance best practice models under the NDIS leading us to sector reform advocacy starting with the *NDIS Early Childhood Reset*. In 2023, we formalised our network through the development of a governance structure and Terms of Reference. At the time of formation, we had 14 providers. The Purpose of the current group is to collectively advocate as not-for-profit providers for high quality, evidence-based early childhood intervention to support children and young people 0-18 years old in Australia. Since our formation in 2023, our membership has grown to 20 organisations that meet fortnightly to:

- Share collective experience within the sector with a solutions-focused approach.
- Work together to understand the reform context and form a united view regarding impacts and opportunities.
- Pursue an advocacy agenda that promotes best practice interventions, access and equity for children and young people with developmental concerns, delays or disabilities and their families.

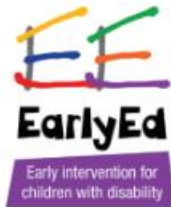
We have a shared vision that all children and young people should have access to best practice intervention within a community context. We seek a policy and operational environment that promotes this vision.

### ***Note of Acknowledgements***

On behalf of the Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network (ECIBPN or 'the Network'), I would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Chair, Deputy, and the entire Inquiry team for providing us with the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Foundational Supports and Disability in New South Wales. We deeply appreciate the time and effort you have dedicated to considering our response. We also refer the committee to the following publications of relevance from our Network:

- *Discussion Paper: Early Childhood Intervention and Therapeutic Supports for Children and Young People under Age 16* (March 2023).<sup>1</sup>
- *Foundational Supports and the Disability Ecosystem for Children with Developmental Concerns, Delays, Differences, and Disabilities: Principles, Best Practices, and Solutions* (July 2024).<sup>2</sup>

## Our Members



## Summary of Recommendations

### 1. Rebuild and Strengthen Foundational Supports

- Reinststate and properly fund foundational supports to ensure universal access, including for children not eligible for the NDIS and regardless of visa status.
- Develop and implement a coordinated Foundational Supports Strategy in partnership with federal and state governments, community not-for-profits and other key service providers.

### 2. Invest in Community-Based, Not-for-Profit Services

- Recognise and reinstate funding for experienced community-based Not-for-Profit services as central players in delivering best practice early childhood intervention (ECI) supports.
- Provide sustainable funding models that reduce reliance on fundraising and allow continuity of care.

### 3. Align Service Delivery with Best Practice Models

- Promote and fund transdisciplinary teams led by a Key Worker to simplify service access and improve outcomes.
- Ensure services are culturally safe, inclusive, and delivered in natural settings such as homes, playgroups, and early learning environments.

### 4. Improve Access and Equity

- Address long waitlists and workforce shortages, particularly in rural and regional areas.
- Subsidise or fully fund diagnostic and therapeutic supports for families unable to access them privately.
- Recognise that community-based organisations are increasingly supporting families who are disengaging from private NDIS services—often due to cost or access barriers—while receiving no additional funding. This is creating serious equity concerns and placing unsustainable pressure on not-for-profits to do more with less.
- Develop public awareness campaigns to educate families and professionals about developmental concerns and available supports.

### 5. Rebuild and Develop the Workforce

- Support workforce development through improved remuneration, professional development, and recognition of early childhood educators as key professionals in Early Childhood Intervention.

- Encourage the use of parent-peer workers as a trained and funded part of the support system.
- Invest in supportive work environments with adequate supervision and mentoring.

**6. Enhance Integration and Collaboration**

- Establish integrated care models that co-locate or coordinate health, education, and social supports.
- Promote cross-sector professional development to enhance collaboration across systems.
- Improve information sharing through shared digital infrastructure and data systems.

**7. Engage and Partner with Aboriginal and CALD Communities**

- Build genuine partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and culturally diverse service providers to co-design and deliver supports.
- Recognise the specialised approaches required for effective, culturally appropriate early intervention.

**8. Implement NDIS Review and Disability Royal Commission Recommendations**

- Ensure NSW policy reforms reflect and operationalise national-level findings, with a specific focus on inclusion, early supports, and system navigation.
- Support family capacity building, decision-making, and advocacy as core components of service delivery.

## Response to the Inquiry

### Introduction

The establishment of a Select Committee to investigate and report on child development, early childhood intervention services, and other foundational and disability supports in New South Wales is a significant step. This inquiry creates an important opportunity to focus on how these services support a child's development, health, and wellbeing—especially during the early years.

While a range of initiatives and programs are in place across state and Commonwealth-funded systems, they do not reflect the full ecosystem of support that families rely on. Notably, the *Response to Research Request* document published alongside this inquiry includes a six-page mapping of service types. However, within that mapping—particularly under *Diagnostics and Therapeutics*—the role of community-based non-government providers is **only briefly acknowledged**, noted in the “Funding and Delivery” column as part of a general reference to “non-government and private providers.”

This omission highlights a broader issue: the **critical role of community-based not-for-profit organisations** in delivering early intervention and foundational supports is not fully recognised in current policy or system-level analysis. These providers are not only responding to gaps left by overstretched or inaccessible services—they are also absorbing increasing numbers of families who are disengaging from private practice due to cost, eligibility barriers, or lack of cultural safety. Yet this work is often delivered without additional funding, placing significant pressure on organisational sustainability.

A more comprehensive overview of foundational supports—particularly the contributions of community-based not-for-profits—is available in our previous publication: *Foundational Supports and the Disability Ecosystem for Children with Developmental Concerns, Delays, Differences, and Disabilities: Principles, Best Practices, and Solutions* (July 2024).

### ***The Role of Community Not-for-Profits***

Community not-for-profit (NFP) early childhood intervention organisations play a vital role in supporting early childhood intervention in New South Wales. These groups often provide essential services and resources that complement government initiatives and fill gaps in support through contributing:

1. **Supported Playgroups:** Community NFPs often run supported playgroups, which offer a structured environment where children with developmental concerns can engage in play-based learning. These playgroups also provide parents with opportunities to connect with other families and access professional advice. These are funded through various sources including philanthropic funding.

2. **Best Practice Supports:** Provision of Best Practice Early Childhood intervention through the Key Worker model. Including early childhood teachers, allied health supports, community engagement and education support where the child lives, learns and plays.
3. **Advocacy and Inclusion Supports:** As established providers, members of the Network have long-standing relationships in their community that have allowed them to build local, trusted, and supportive networks for children and families and other stakeholders such as medical professionals. They continue to work together and to have relationships with First Nations and other culturally specific organisations to provide culturally safe environments and supports. Through State funding such as Start Strong Pathways and grant funding they support inclusion in mainstream informal early childhood programs i.e. mainstream playgroups including multicultural community programs.
4. **Non-funded supports:** Many of the Networks' NFPs currently offer free services to families that are unable to meet NDIS criteria or find themselves slipping through gaps in the mainstream service system due to extended waitlists, understaffing or in some cases no skilled staff available (especially in regional and rural locations). These supports are often funded through localised fundraising efforts creating significant challenges to sustainability and continuity of supports.
5. **Education and Community of Practice:** The Network's NFP organisations often participate in or lead communities of practice focused on early childhood health and development. These networks facilitate collaboration, share best practices, and advocate for policies that support early intervention across sectors including Health, Education and Disability.
6. **Toy Libraries:** Many NFP operate with the support of volunteers toy libraries that create equity of access to play opportunities for home, informal intergenerational community connection and support, advice and referral.
7. **Parent Capacity Building:** Many ECIBPN NFP organisations have a long history of developing and delivering capacity-building programs and resources to empower parents as this is in the long-term interests of the family. It is also a best practice and sustainable approach for government.

These community-driven service efforts play a crucial role in promoting a child's development, ensuring they receive the necessary support to where and when they need it. Global evidence shows that early intervention, when implemented correctly, can significantly reduce the need for longer-term support and help children lead more independent lives.

### **Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention**

In 2016, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDA) funded the development of the national guidelines for early childhood intervention titled “Best Practice in Early Childhood Early Intervention,” which were drafted by Early Childhood Intervention Australia (ECIA) (now Reimagine). These Guidelines set out four (4) pillars underpinning best practice, which are outlined below.

<b>Quality Area 1: Family</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family-centered and Strengths-based Practice</li> <li>Culturally Responsive Practice</li> </ul>	<b>Quality Area 2: Inclusion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inclusive Participatory Practice</li> <li>Engaging the Child in Natural Environments</li> </ul>
<b>Quality Area 3: Teamwork</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative Teamwork Practice</li> <li>Capacity-Building Practice</li> </ul>	<b>Quality Area 4: Universal Principles</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evidence Base, Standards, Accountability and Practice</li> <li>Outcome-Based Approach</li> </ul>

The NDIS [website](#) elaborates on the ‘Best Practice Guidelines in Early Childhood Intervention’ (henceforce, ‘Best Practice Guidelines’):

*These guidelines tell us that children and families benefit the most when we base early childhood intervention on the following:*

- The family is at the centre of all services and supports - the family and early childhood professionals work together in partnership. Services and supports are based on the family’s needs and choices.*
- All families are different and unique - services and supports are delivered in a way that is respectful of a family’s cultural, language and social backgrounds, and their values and beliefs.*
- The child is included at home and in the community - the child takes part in home and community life, with supports as needed, to create a real sense of belonging.*
- The child practises and learns new skills everyday - the child learns and practises skills in the activities and daily routines of their everyday life.*
- Early childhood professionals and family form a team around the child - a family works together with early childhood professionals to form a team around the child. They share information, knowledge and skills. One main person from this team, called a key worker, may be allocated to work with the family.*
- Supports build everyone’s knowledge and skills - building the knowledge, skills and confidence of the family and the important people in a child’s life will have the biggest impact on a child’s learning and development.*



- *Services and supports work with the family on the goals they have for their child and family - early childhood professionals focus on what parents or carers want for their child and family, and work closely with the family to achieve the best outcomes for their child.*
- *Early childhood professionals deliver quality services and supports - early childhood professionals have qualifications and experience in early childhood development, and offer services based on sound evidence and research.*

*Best practice recognises that children learn and develop in natural, everyday settings.*

*This includes their own home, and other places, such as childcare, playgroup, kindergarten or preschool, where they play with family or friends. This means the adults they are with need information, tools and support to help the child's development and participation.*

*Being included in these everyday activities gives children with developmental delay or disability the same opportunities as all children.*

*It provides them with opportunities to develop friendships, interact with others and be a part of their community.*

*Best practice not only takes into account broad early childhood intervention research, but also evidence relating to the needs of children with a specific diagnosis, such as autism spectrum disorder or cerebral palsy.*

These principles are currently under review, however, we seek to highlight in our submission where the system is preventing these principles from being realised, and offer solutions that will enable Best Practice to be applied across diverse settings and systems.

## **Response to Part C**

### **Role of Diagnostic Services in Early Childhood Intervention**

Diagnostic services are essential in early childhood intervention as they help identify developmental delays and disabilities at an early stage in a child's life. This early detection allows for timely and appropriate interventions, which can significantly improve a child's developmental outcomes.

#### **Existing Gaps and Barriers**

1. **Access and Availability:** There are currently disparities in access to early childhood intervention services, particularly in rural and remote areas. Families in all regions are facing challenges in accessing timely and appropriate support. In rural and remote areas this is worse due to a lack of local services and long travel distances.<sup>3</sup>

While there is currently insufficient data collected about average wait times for children to be provided service through community health services in NSW, it is the experience of ECIBPN members that wait times are between 6-24 months, which has significant impacts on early childhood development.

2. **Workforce Shortages:** There is a shortage of qualified early childhood intervention professionals, such as early childhood teachers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists. This shortage can lead to long waiting times for assessments and interventions.<sup>4</sup>

ECIBPN believes that the perceived skills shortage in Australia is not due to an actual lack of skills, but rather a shift in the market dynamics created by the NDIS. This shift has led to a departure from best practice models towards a more clinical transactional approach, characterised by weekly or fortnightly services. Such an approach often overlooks the developmental stages and learning capacities of children and families with concerns, delays or disabilities. Consequently, this has resulted in workforce shortages, increased therapy fatigue, and reduced outcomes. Most concerning, it has led to the erosion of best practice in early childhood intervention (ECI) as the current funding model favours a transactional therapy-focused model.

3. **Coordination and Collaboration of Services:** There is a need for better coordination between different service providers, including health, education, and disability services. Families often report difficulties in navigating the system and coordinating care across multiple providers and collaboration has reduced as families favour direct therapy over non face-to-face services.<sup>5</sup>

4. **Cultural Responsiveness:** Services need to be more culturally responsive to meet the needs of diverse communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Our ECIBPN are seeing more of these families as other providers are avoiding these families due to the current model not accounting for the specialised work required to adequately support them.<sup>6</sup>
5. **Funding and Resources:** Insufficient funding and resources can limit the availability and quality of early childhood intervention services. This includes funding for training and professional development for staff, as well as resources for families.<sup>7</sup>
6. **High Cost of Assessments and Equity:** The cost of diagnostic services and extended wait lists to gain appointments can be a barrier for many families with those that can afford it paying privately and others waiting for public services.

Unfortunately, while disability doesn't discriminate through socio-economic classes, we often see a large portion of the economically lower classes and at-risk vulnerable community members unable to access expensive diagnostic supports, creating extended impacts and further disadvantage on those who need support the most.

Global research indicates that children with disabilities are more likely to come from families with lower socio-economic status. Families with children who have disabilities often face higher levels of financial strain due to additional medical and care expenses, which can impact their overall economic stability.

Additionally, children with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty and lower educational attainment compared to their peers without disabilities. This socio-economic disparity can affect their access to quality healthcare, education, and other essential services, further exacerbating the challenges they face. These statistics underscore the importance of targeted support and interventions to address the unique needs of children with disabilities from lower socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

7. **Awareness and Education:** Lack of awareness among parents, caregivers, early childhood education centres, and medical professionals about the importance of early diagnosis and the availability of best practice models of services can significantly delay seeking help. Early diagnosis is crucial for ensuring that children with developmental delays or disabilities receive the support they need to thrive.

Research shows that early intervention can greatly improve a child's developmental outcomes, including their cognitive, social, and physical abilities. However, many families and professionals are not fully informed about the signs of developmental delays or the benefits of early intervention services.

This lack of awareness can lead to missed opportunities for quality early support, which is vital during the critical early years of a child's development. Programs aimed at raising awareness about developmental disabilities and the importance of best practice models of early intervention have been shown to improve knowledge and attitudes among parents, educators, and healthcare providers.

By increasing awareness and education, we can ensure that more children receive timely and appropriate interventions, ultimately enhancing their long-term health and wellbeing.<sup>9</sup>

8. **Integration and Coordination:** Fragmented services and lack of coordination between different healthcare providers can result in inefficiencies and gaps in care precisely at a time when seamlessness is essential.

### Measures to Improve Effectiveness, Availability, and Access

1. **Align to Best Practice:** Implementing models aligned to best practice would improve effectiveness, availability and access. For instance, to implement Key Worker, then families are supported, have less of a complex system to navigate, have less over-servicing, it is more cost-effective and reduces burdens on workforce. Using a transdisciplinary approach led by a Key Worker is an ideal way to improve effectiveness of the service system.
2. **Look at What is Currently Available:** The ECIBPN is a network of community-based NFPs across NSW, ACT and Victoria that have been providing early childhood intervention supports for an average of 50+ years. There is significant knowledge still within the sector to help develop systems and supports that can extend the reach and development of children needing ECI.
3. **Investment in Technology:** Upgrading diagnostic equipment and adopting telehealth services can improve access to diagnostic services, especially in underserved areas.<sup>10</sup>
4. **Workforce Development:** Increasing training programs and incentives for best practice service delivery through the Key Worker model with a focus on early childhood teachers to work in early childhood intervention can help address workforce shortages.<sup>11</sup>
5. **Financial Support:** Providing subsidised or free diagnostic services can reduce the financial burden on families. Alternatively, this could be provided by state-health funded services.<sup>12</sup>
6. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Educating parents, families, caregivers, early childhood education centres, medical professionals and community engagement supports about the importance of acting on their concerns, directing them to community-based services in the first instance to get best practice support early and quickly, and helping them to identify best-practice services that empower parents by building their capacity.
7. **Integrated Care Models:** Developing integrated care models that coordinate diagnostic services with other healthcare and educational services can improve the overall effectiveness of early childhood intervention.<sup>13</sup>

8. **Practical Tools for Assessment, Planning, and Family Empowerment:** Using research-based tools is essential to support a consistent, informed, and family-centred approach to understanding and responding to developmental concerns, delays, and disabilities. Tools such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), Routines-Based Interview (RBI), Pictability, and the F-words for Child Development framework are used by early childhood intervention professionals. These tools serve multiple functions:
- **Screening and identification** of developmental concerns in a timely and accessible way
  - **Structured conversations** with families that promote reflection, shared goal-setting, and a strengths-based outlook
  - **Empowerment of families** to articulate their priorities, values, and aspirations
  - **Alignment with best practice principles** such as naturalistic intervention, cultural responsiveness, and capacity-building

When used well, these tools support a shift away from deficit-based assessment toward a collaborative, inclusive approach that positions families as experts in their child's development. Their use reinforces high-quality practice and helps anchor services in real-life routines and family goals—an approach increasingly at risk under current transactional funding models.

## **Response to Part D**

### **Impact of Gaps and Barriers in Early Childhood Intervention**

#### **On a Child's Development, Health, and Wellbeing**

1. **Delayed Diagnosis and Intervention:** When diagnostic services are inaccessible, early detection of developmental delays or disabilities is hindered. This can lead to missed opportunities for timely intervention, which is crucial for optimal developmental outcomes.

Early childhood intervention during the first 2000 days of a child's life is crucial for their overall development, health, and wellbeing. This period, which spans from conception to around five years of age, is a critical window for brain development and the establishment of foundational skills. Research indicates that targeted early childhood intervention programs can significantly improve cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes, setting the stage for success in school and later life. For instance, studies have shown that children who receive early intervention score higher on cognitive tests and exhibit better socio-emotional skills compared to those who do not.

Timely and appropriate interventions can help identify and address developmental delays and disabilities, ensuring that children receive the support they need to thrive. Early intervention can also reduce the long-term need for specialised services, easing the burden on families and the healthcare system.

Additionally, prevention efforts during this period are cost-effective, as they reduce the likelihood of poor health outcomes and associated economic impacts in the short and long term.

By investing in early childhood intervention, we can promote healthier, more resilient children and create a stronger foundation for their future.<sup>14</sup>

2. **Worsening Health Outcomes:** Without early intervention, children may experience worsening health conditions, which can affect their physical, cognitive, and emotional development.<sup>15</sup>
3. **Educational Challenges:** Children who do not receive early intervention may struggle with learning and social interactions, leading to long-term educational challenges.<sup>16</sup>
4. **Increased Stress and Anxiety:** The lack of early support can lead to increased stress and anxiety in children, impacting their overall wellbeing.<sup>17</sup>

### **On Families and Carers**

1. **Emotional and Financial Strain:** Families may experience significant emotional stress and financial burdens due to the lack of accessible diagnostic services and early intervention programs.<sup>18</sup>
2. **Parent/Caregiver Burnout:** The additional responsibilities and lack of support can lead to caregiver burnout, affecting their ability to provide optimal care for their child.<sup>19</sup>
3. **Reduced Quality of Life:** The overall quality of life for families can be negatively impacted, as they may struggle to balance care responsibilities with other aspects of life.<sup>20</sup>

### **On Government Services and Systems**

1. **Increased Demand on Healthcare Services:** Delayed interventions can lead to more complex health issues, increasing the demand on healthcare services and resources.<sup>21</sup>
2. **Higher Long-term Costs:** Early intervention is cost-effective; delays can result in higher long-term costs for healthcare, education, and social services.<sup>22</sup>
3. **Fragmented Service Delivery:** Lack of coordination between different services can lead to inefficiencies and gaps in care, making it difficult for families to navigate the system.<sup>23</sup>
4. **Policy and Funding Challenges:** Addressing these gaps requires comprehensive policy changes and increased funding to ensure equitable access to early childhood intervention services.<sup>24</sup>

## **Response to Part E**

### **Opportunities to increase engagement across sectors and improved collaboration across both government and non-government services, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, early learning services, educational settings and health services**

Increasing engagement and improving collaboration across sectors in New South Wales (NSW) can significantly enhance early childhood intervention support. Here are some opportunities to achieve this:

#### **Opportunities for Engagement and Collaboration**

1. **Don't reinvent the wheel:** There are highly skilled and trained service providers across NSW who have been delivering early childhood developmental, and intervention support for multiple decades and are still positioned to deliver mainstream and targeted supports. These providers are well-positioned to continue delivering both mainstream and targeted supports—and they bring with them deep community relationships, workforce knowledge, and a strong track record of best practice.

It would be a **strategic error** to overlook those who have consistently delivered high-quality early childhood intervention. Many of these organisations operated under best practice models long before the introduction of the NDIS and have worked hard to preserve these approaches despite the structural and funding challenges the Scheme has introduced.

These community-based providers are already offering efficient, outcome-focused, and cost-effective early childhood intervention services. They have the infrastructure, systems, and workforce capability in place to scale service delivery—returning to or even exceeding pre-NDIS levels—if provided with the right policy settings and sustainable investment.

Recognising and engaging with this existing capacity will not only support equity of access and stronger outcomes for children and families, but also ensure a more integrated and efficient system that builds on what is already working well.

2. **Integrated Service Delivery Models:** Developing integrated care models that bring together health, education, and social services can ensure a holistic approach to early childhood intervention. This can include co-locating services or creating multi/trans disciplinary teams that work together to support children and families.
3. **Partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs):** Strengthening partnerships with ACCOs can ensure culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal children and families. ACCOs can provide valuable insights and support in designing and delivering early childhood intervention programs that respect and incorporate Aboriginal cultural practices.



4. **Cross-Sector Training and Professional Development:** Offering joint training programs for professionals across different sectors can enhance understanding and collaboration. This can include training on cultural competence, early childhood development, and integrated care approaches.
5. **Community Engagement and Outreach:** Engaging with communities through outreach programs can raise awareness about the importance of early childhood intervention and the available services. This can involve working with local community leaders, schools, and healthcare providers to disseminate information and encourage participation.
6. **Shared Data Systems:** Implementing shared data systems can facilitate better communication and coordination between different services. This can help track a child's progress, identify gaps in services, and ensure that all providers have access to relevant information.
7. **Policy and Funding Support:** Advocating for policies and funding that support integrated and collaborative approaches to early childhood intervention can help address systemic barriers. This can include funding for joint initiatives, incentives for collaboration, and policies that promote integrated service delivery.
8. **Public and NFP Partnerships:** Encouraging partnerships between government and non-government organisations, including community NFP sector entities, can bring additional resources and expertise to early childhood intervention programs. These partnerships can support innovative approaches and expand the reach of services.
9. **Family-Centred Approaches:** Involving families in the planning and delivery of services can ensure that interventions are tailored to their needs and preferences. This can include creating family advisory councils, conducting regular feedback sessions, and providing support for family-led initiatives.

By leveraging these opportunities, NSW can enhance the effectiveness, availability, and accessibility of early childhood intervention supports, ensuring better outcomes for children and their families.

## **Response to Part F**

### **Other government or best practice child development and early childhood intervention service models and programs operating outside of New South Wales.**

In NSW, prior to the introduction of the NDIS, there were two key elements that supported strong early childhood intervention systems.

First, the **Early Childhood Intervention Coordination Program (ECICP)** operated for over two decades as a robust, government-funded coordination model. It facilitated collaboration between government and community-based organisations and supported interagency planning, workforce development, and system navigation. ECICP played a critical systems role—ensuring that providers across sectors could work together effectively to meet the needs of children and families. While the program was discontinued with the rollout of the NDIS, some regions have retained informal elements due to its enduring value and effectiveness.

Second, the **community-based not-for-profit (NFP) sector** has long delivered early childhood intervention services across NSW. These organisations are embedded in their communities and provide inclusive, strengths-based support—often through a Key Worker model. Their approach is holistic, culturally responsive, and focused not only on the child’s development, but also on building the capacity and confidence of families. Community-based NFPs remain well-positioned to deliver both targeted and foundational supports and are central to any future model seeking to restore a high-functioning, equitable early childhood support system.

**International models** provide valuable insights into how Australia can scale and sustain high-quality, community-based early intervention through foundational supports.

- In the **United States**, the *Early Steps* program in Florida offers a strong example. Funded by government, Early Steps supports children from birth to 36 months through multidisciplinary teams delivering services in natural environments. At the centre of the model is a Key Worker (or Primary Service Provider) who builds trusted relationships with families and coordinates access to broader supports, including planning, therapy, and peer support. This model closely aligns with ECIBPN’s best practice principles and demonstrates how coordinated, family-centred intervention can be delivered effectively at scale.
- In the **United Kingdom**, the *Sure Start* initiative—launched in the late 1990s—provided integrated education, health, and family services for children under five in disadvantaged communities. It offered place-based, family-focused support that reduced barriers to access and improved developmental outcomes. Although funding was significantly reduced in recent years, evaluations of the program demonstrated lasting benefits for children’s health, school readiness, and parental wellbeing.

As outlined in our July 2024 White Paper (*Foundational Supports and the Disability Ecosystem for Children with Developmental Concerns, Delays, Differences and Disabilities*), these Australian and international examples demonstrate that high-quality, inclusive, and coordinated early childhood systems are not only possible—they are proven, effective, and ready to be scaled when backed by sustained government investment and delivered through community-based providers.

## **Response to Part G**

### **Workforce issues in the child development and early childhood intervention sectors, including workforce demand and the availability, quality and capacity of existing workers.**

#### **Workforce Demand**

The demand for professionals in child development and early childhood intervention is high due to the increasing recognition of the importance of early intervention for children's long-term outcomes. However, several challenges persist:

1. **High Turnover Rates:** Many professionals in this sector experience burnout and job dissatisfaction due to high-stress levels, large caseloads, the introduction of a billable hour model for children and families limiting the supports required and inadequate support.<sup>25</sup>
2. **Workforce Shortages:** There is a significant shortage of trained professionals, including paediatricians, specialist early childhood teachers, speech therapists, and occupational therapists, which can lead to delays in service delivery.<sup>26</sup>
3. **Over Emphasis on Therapists:** The NDIS model has favoured a market-based approach and resulted in a significant increase in demand for therapy. On the other hand, the role of specialist early childhood educators has been diminished. This must be addressed in future workforce planning for the early childhood intervention sector. The Specialist Early Childhood Teacher plays a critical role in best practice early intervention supports, their knowledge and training in the developmental stages of a child should have stronger recognition and be encouraged to facilitate the Key worker role.
4. **Diversity Gaps:** The workforce often lacks diversity, which may not reflect the demographics of the children served.<sup>27</sup>

An additional and underutilised workforce solution is the inclusion of trained Parent Peer Workers. These individuals bring lived experience of navigating services, setting goals, and supporting their child's development. When equipped with training and embedded within multidisciplinary teams, Parent Peer Workers can build trust with families, reduce service overwhelm, and strengthen engagement—particularly for families who may be disengaged or new to the system.

Parent Peer Workers complement the role of non-peer professionals, providing emotional support, lived expertise, and capacity-building that enhances—not replaces—clinical or educational intervention. When embedded in early childhood intervention teams within community-based organisations, and properly funded, they can represent a cost-effective and impactful solution. This approach expands the workforce, supports earlier and more sustained family engagement, and reinforces best practice by recognising the critical role of peer support in family-centred early intervention.

### Availability, Quality, and Capacity of Existing Workers

1. **Low Wages and Benefits for Early Childhood Educators:** Many early childhood educators and intervention specialists receive low wages and limited benefits, contributing to high turnover and difficulty in attracting new talent. This is a reality due to the lack of indexation for early childhood intervention rates in the NDIS, and low funding rates for supports in ECEC settings for staff supporting children with additional need.<sup>28</sup>
2. **Limited Professional Development:** Opportunities for ongoing training and professional development are often insufficient, impacting the quality of care and support provided.<sup>29</sup>
3. **Inadequate Support Systems:** Professionals frequently lack the necessary support systems, such as supervision and mentoring, to effectively manage their roles and responsibilities. This is also a financial burden that this can add to organisations to provide this. It is such a crucial aspect to effective practice but is often overlooked because of costs.<sup>30</sup>

### Addressing Workforce Issues Through Best Practice Frameworks

1. **Improved Compensation and Benefits:** Ensuring fair wages and benefits for early childhood professionals can help attract and retain qualified staff. Policies that provide financial incentives and career advancement opportunities can also be beneficial.<sup>31</sup>
2. **Comprehensive Training Programs:** Implementing robust training and professional development programs can enhance the skills and knowledge of the workforce. This includes cross-sector training to promote collaboration between health, education, and social services.<sup>32</sup>
3. **Supportive Work Environments:** Creating supportive work environments with adequate supervision, mentoring, and resources can reduce burnout and improve job satisfaction. This can include implementing reflective supervision practices and promoting self-care strategies.<sup>33</sup>
4. **Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives:** Promoting diversity within the workforce through targeted recruitment and retention strategies can ensure that the workforce better reflects the communities they serve.<sup>34</sup>
5. **Integrated Service Delivery Models:** Developing integrated care models that facilitate collaboration between different sectors can improve service delivery and outcomes for children and families.<sup>35</sup>

This includes shared data systems and coordinated care plans.

6. **Policy and Funding Support:** Advocating for policies that support the early childhood workforce, including increased funding for early intervention programs, can address systemic barriers and improve service quality.<sup>36</sup>

By adopting these best practice frameworks, the child development and early childhood intervention sectors can address workforce issues, ensuring that children and families receive high-quality, timely, and effective support.

## **Response to Part H**

### **Measures to implement recommendations of the NDIS Review Final Report and the Disability Royal Commission Final Report in relation to foundational supports,**

Please refer to our recent Discussion Paper *Foundational Supports and the Disability Ecosystem for Children with Developmental Concerns, Delays, Differences, and Disabilities: Principles, Best Practices, and Solutions (2024)* attached for more information in response to this question.

To implement the recommendations of the NDIS Review Final Report and the Disability Royal Commission Final Report in relation to foundational supports for early childhood intervention in New South Wales (NSW), several targeted measures can be undertaken:

#### **1. Develop a Unified System of Support**

- **Collaborative Framework:** Establish a collaborative framework involving federal, state, and local governments to design, fund, and commission a coherent set of foundational supports for early childhood intervention.
- **Integrated Services:** Create a connected system of support that includes accessible and inclusive mainstream services, foundational supports, and individual support funded through the NDIS. The service system should be designed to ensure a seamless experience for families on their journey.

#### **2. Increase Accessibility and Inclusion**

- **Mainstream Services:** Ensure that mainstream services are more accessible and inclusive for children with developmental concerns and disabilities. This includes improving physical accessibility, providing disability awareness training, and ensuring services are culturally appropriate.
- **Community Inclusion:** Promote community inclusion and participation through programs that support social and economic engagement for children with disabilities and their families.

#### **3. Expand and Improve Foundational Supports**

- **General Foundational Supports:** Enhance programs and activities such as information and advice, individual and family capacity building, peer support, self-advocacy, and disability employment supports.
- **Targeted Foundational Supports:** Provide targeted supports for children with lower-level support needs who are not eligible for the NDIS, including therapeutic support in the home and community, aids and equipment.
- **Universal Access:** Ensure that Foundational Supports are universal for all children, regardless of visa status.

#### 4. Strengthen Workforce Capacity

- **Training and Development:** Invest in training and professional development for the workforce to ensure they are equipped to deliver high-quality early childhood intervention supports. In particular, restore the role of specialist early childhood educators as part of the front line in community-based child and family organisations. This includes cross-sector training to promote collaboration between health, education, and social services.
- **Parent-Peer Workforce:** Trained and paid parents are an untapped workforce that have complementary skills to those of non-peer professionals. The role of parent-peer workers is valued by our ECIBPN and we recognise the role they play within our organisations. This can be properly recognised and funded so that it is a part of all our organisations. Parent-peer workers within our organisations can be a bridge to a sustainable network into the future.
- **Attract and Retain Talent:** Implement strategies to attract, retain, and train a workforce that is responsive to the needs of children and families, and delivers quality support.

#### 5. Enhance Digital Infrastructure

- **Accessible Information Systems:** Develop digital infrastructure that provides accessible, timely, and reliable information to support families and streamline processes.
- **Shared Data Systems:** Implement shared data systems to facilitate better communication and coordination between different services.

#### 6. Policy and Funding Support

- **Foundational Supports Strategy:** Develop and implement a Foundational Supports Strategy in collaboration with the Department of Social Services and state and Territory governments.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Ensure sustainable funding for foundational supports to reduce financial barriers and improve service delivery.

#### 7. Empower Families and Children

- **Decision-Making Support:** Provide better support for families to make decisions about their children's lives, including access to information and advocacy services.
- **Capacity-Building for Parents:** Increase the availability of capacity-building programs and resources that build parent skills and confidence to support their child and family into the future.
- **Safeguarding and Quality Improvement:** Embed continuous quality improvement and safeguarding measures to ensure that supports are empowering and tailored to individual needs.

By undertaking these measures, NSW can effectively implement the recommendations of the NDIS Review and the Disability Royal Commission, ensuring that early childhood intervention supports are accessible, inclusive, and effective for all children and their families.

## **Conclusion**

The Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network (ECIBPN) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important Inquiry into foundational and disability supports available for children and young people in New South Wales. Throughout this submission, we have sought to highlight the essential role that early, inclusive, and coordinated intervention plays in fostering the wellbeing and development of children with developmental concerns, delays, or disabilities.

Our collective experience, grounded in decades of practice across metropolitan and regional NSW, demonstrates that when best practice models are applied—particularly those centering families, community inclusion, and transdisciplinary approaches—children are given the strongest possible start in life. However, persistent barriers such as service fragmentation, long wait times, inequitable access, workforce shortages, and the erosion of supports have limited the realisation of this vision.

To build a system that genuinely serves all children and families, we urge the NSW Government to:

- Invest in community-based, not-for-profit early intervention services that already deliver high-impact, evidence-based supports;
- Rebalance funding and policy settings to prioritise inclusive, coordinated care built around children's natural environments;
- Ensure equitable access regardless of location, socio-economic status, cultural background, or NDIS eligibility;
- Design, implement and scale foundational supports as critical infrastructure in the disability ecosystem.

This Inquiry provides a pivotal opportunity to reshape early childhood intervention policy and delivery in NSW so that every child can thrive. We stand ready to partner with government and community to deliver on this shared vision.

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## **PART G**

**workforce issues in the child development and early childhood intervention sectors, including workforce demand and the availability, quality and capacity of existing workers**

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